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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KHARTOUM 000762

DEPT FOR AF A/S FRAZER, SE WILLIAMSON, AF/SPG
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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: MAY 18 ABYEI UPDATE: SPORADIC FIGHTING AMIDST EFFORTS TO
END STRIFE

REFS: A. KHARTOUM 737
[1](#)B. KHARTOUM 745

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The situation in Abyei remained quiet as of mid-day May 18, after renewed fighting on May 16-17. SAF remains in the town, despite a UN-brokered mutual withdrawal agreement with the SPLA "police forces," which departed the town May 17. The Ceasefire Joint Monitoring Commission (CJMC) will fly to Abyei May 18 to attempt to disengage the forces. Despite assurances to VP Kiir, President Bashir appears either unable or unwilling yet to restrain SAF units in Abyei. The UN has begun a humanitarian relief effort for the estimated 106,000 affected people, 50,000 of which are IDPs. A USAID assessment team is traveling to the region, but USAID already has begun to plan relief operations, based on information currently available. END SUMMARY.

Abyei: Fighting on May 16
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Despite a May 15 agreement by the SAF and the SPLA on mutual withdrawal of forces -- and the presence in Abyei of senior SAF and SPLA/SPLM officials along with the UNMIS Deputy Force Commander -- to attempt to resolve the crisis, intense mortar and small arms fire broke out again late May 16, lasting into the early hours of May 17. UNMIS staff reportedly spent a cold, rainy night sheltered against the berm surrounding their camp to avoid shell fire that was falling inside. Zambian peacekeepers in Abyei were reinforced from Kadugli mid-day May 17. The situation remained quiet as of mid-day May 18.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Despite the mutual-withdrawal agreement, Embassy has received reliable reports that the SAF 31st Brigade remains in Abyei town, while the SPLA has withdrawn south of the Kiir River. According to SPLM sources in Juba, the SPLA unit that came under attack is assigned to the Joint Integrated Unit (JIU) that was to remain in the town. Several observers in Juba blame the fighting on irregular forces such as the renegade Southern Sudan Unity Movement, which reportedly receives support from Khartoum to confront the SPLA and SSPS in and around Abyei. SSUM is an SPLM splinter group with years of bad blood between the two organizations. Irregular Misseriya Arab militia supported by Khartoum also regularly confront SPLA along the river outside of Abyei town.

Efforts to Restore Calm Flounder
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[1](#)4. (SBU) On May 17, the EU Special Envoy told Acting CG Juba that President Bashir and First Vice President Kiir had spoken by phone twice during the previous 24 hours. On May 16, Bashir committed to restrain the SAF and remove the 31st SAF Brigade from Abyei town, but the outbreak of fighting that evening and the result of the May 17 telcon left Kiir "extremely dissatisfied" and pessimistic about a speedy resolution to the crisis. Kiir used a May 17 meeting to request the "joint" AU/Arab League delegation to press Bashir to meet his May 16 commitments. To date, the SAF has not withdrawn from

Abyei, and GOSS Presidential Affairs Minister Luka Biong Deng reports the JIU/SAF contingent has become "integrated" with the independent SAF force splitting the JIU along political lines.

5 (SBU) The Area Joint Military Committee (AJMC) met early May 16 and produced "decisive and comprehensive remedies and confidence building measures," according to the UN Regional Coordinator. Later that same day, the SPLM sent a joint civilian/military negotiating team led by GoSS Minister of Presidential Affairs Luka Biong Deng (himself an Abyei native) and SPLA JIU Commander LTG. Thomas Cirillo Oteng to Abyei to meet as a Joint Defense Board (JDB) with Cirillo's SAF counterparts. Accompanying the SPLM were two unofficial Amciti advisors. It was following the JDB meeting, as fresh orders were being relayed to troops in the field, that the SAF renewed its attack, and Cirillo and company fled Abyei to the safety of Agok.

¶6. (SBU) The UN Regional Coordinator's office is extremely concerned that the renewed fighting indicates a deterioration of the rank-and-file respect for two quite well-established mediation mechanisms: the AJMC and JDB. The CMCJ was to fly to Abyei on May 18 to try to defuse the security situation and try to disengage the opposing forces.

Humanitarian Response

¶7. (SBU) Abyei town is reported to be partially destroyed, looted and deserted, with columns of displaced people headed both north and south (more heading south than north). 20,000 are reported to have congregated in Agok to the south of the river and 13-14,000 in each of two other villages along the river. The UN estimates a population of 50,000 will need immediate assistance and that 56,000 additional persons have been affected by the violence and will

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require humanitarian relief. Weather has been cold and rainy, making a rapid response urgent to prevent outbreaks of disease.

¶8. (SBU) A UN assessment mission left Khartoum on May 17, spending the night in Wau and proceeding to Turalai on May 18 from where the humanitarian response will be launched. Coordination of the Abyei/Agok response is being handled by the UN Southern Sector out of Juba.

¶9. (SBU) According to UNMIS humanitarian officials in Juba, there are significant humanitarian supplies already available for the response including: 390 MT of food pre-positioned in Turalei by WFP with an additional 2,500 MT in Wunruk and 8,000 household kits available through UNICEF in Aweil. Trucking of supplies from the various storage points will begin on May 18. Local staff from NGO partners are on the ground in Agok ready to assist in the distribution.

¶10. (SBU) USAID staff in Khartoum are in regular touch with the Abyei/Agok partners, which include WFP, OCHA, UNICEF, UN Joint Logistics Center, Save the Children/US, GOAL, Mercy Corps, PADCO, and PACT. NGOs have staff in the field who can support the emergency response. A three-person USAID team is scheduled to depart May 19 to Aweil, and from there will travel to Turalai to follow up on the humanitarian response and report back on additional requirements.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) The situation in Abyei remains tenuous. Reports indicate that the fighting began spontaneously over a localized incident between SPLA police (also known as SSPS) and a SAF soldier. Given the prolonged ethnic and political tensions in the region, another such spark could easily ignite renewed fighting unless the two sides can be separated. CDA Fernandez will continue to press the GOS to withdraw the SAF in accordance with this most recent brokered agreement as well as previous JDB and CJMC agreements. We suggest that Abyei should be high on the agenda for the upcoming visit of the Special Envoy, as the GOS should be eager to resolve this crisis given how badly it has tarnished their image. We also need to aggressively demonstrate that the US is fully committed to the Abyei Protocol of the CPA, which we drafted and brokered in Naivasha.

